II Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1933-1935) 1834
SRS Bush Negroes (Gld
Saramacca

KUNU

We sat one night talking about the neku vine, which is used to poison the streams for fishing, and the ceremonies attending the discovery of a new one, how the ownership of it is passed on in the female line, and about the songs which are sung to celebrate the finding, and the feast which is given at this time.

"Do you use this poison only to catch fish, or does it have other uses?" we asked guardedly.

"Well, sometimes people use it to commit suicide," one man said. "That is bad. Sometimes a man or a woman will do it to put a kunu on another's family." He went on to tell of a man who lately did this. He had been promised the daughter of a family in this very village when the girl was a small, small child. It happened that the girl's uncles found gold in one of the streams, for which the white man gave them much goods, and now they were big men. Since the girl's children would inherit much wealth, they wanted her to be the principal wife of a man of rank. There were messages back and forth, and council meetings, but the uncles insisted that the girl return the gifts she had received —insisted against the advice of many people. So this *kio*, this young lad, could get his revenge in no other way than by taking his own life, and sending a kunu to the family.

"The next time you come you will probably see the kunu at work. It is always so. Of what use is wealth when the children begin to die? One year the crops are bad, and you have to buy food. One year you go from one obia man to the next to find out why your sister cannot make children. Your money goes. Kunu is a bad thing."

Another day a woman came to us with a comb to sell. She had heard that we were gathering pieces to put into a large house where carvings from Africa were being shown, and she wanted us to have this comb of hers which was made as a betrothal gift by her husband who was now many years dead. It was an old comb with several broken tines and holes bored into it by insects, but the decorated end was still very beautiful, and we were eager to buy it. When we asked her to explain to us the meaning of the design, she

Herskovits & Herskovits 2-4 (1958-1959) 1934
[illegible]
Surinam

"Don't go off into the bush with a man. A child born to you will have a bad bush god, if you do," she added as an afterthought.

§

In the other corner, Chief And'u, the basia, and about half a dozen men were talking of the great book about their ancestors which the white man had.

"It is large so," said the chief to one of the older men, indicating an imaginary size which multiplied the size of the actual volume at least tenfold. "And people say it has in it pictures of the Apuku gods, small as we ourselves know them, and a picture of the evil Apuku who appear as fire in the distance. . . . Mati, white men have gone into the Kromanti houses in the country of our ancestors and have made pictures!"

"It is impossible!"

"I want to see!"

The old man said, "I will not look. Books are not for us, mati."

"But mati, the G'aman has heard, and he wants to see."

The old man shook his head. He would have nothing of pictures that figured what should never have been allowed to be photographed.

It seemed prudent to give the conversation a new turn. Down river, the men had said that a man of this village had lately found a new seku liana. Was it so?

"The man who found it was my son," said the old man, "you should have come for the dance. You would have seen how we do things here in the bush. But pictures you could not take. No, mati, if you photograph, you take the soul."

The festivities for the find had been especially joyful, he explained, for the boy had only recently come by his gods, and this had been yet another proof that he would serve his family capably. For though the find was his own, all his relatives in the mother's line would enjoy its use. Hereafter, when the poison of its leaves and its slender branches

M. Herskovits & Herskovits E-4 (1931-1932) 1934
[illegible] Bush Negroes [illegible]
Saramacca

was wanted for killing fish in a creek, they would have their own neku.

When a man found a neku vine, he first had to cut some of it, and bring it home with him. Then he sent word to all the men of his village to come and carry the branches of the neku to the place of ceremony. He named the place and day for the pounding of the neku. The invitation was given in the name of the old men of the village, and the headman sent his bassias, those men who assist him in village affairs, with messages to neighboring settlements. When this had been done, the finder of the vine appointed five or six men of his own choice, and these were called "Bassias of Neku." It was they who had charge of the ceremonies. The night preceding the dance these men went about crying, "Tomorrow we will have neku. All must come." Again the men went to the bush where the neku vine had been found, and brought to the village some more of the vine for pounding.

Early the following morning a horn was sounded, and the men from the neighboring villages who had come for the festivities also went and cut some of the neku, and brought it to the pounding place. When the men were gathered, each took up a stick and pounded the neku. And what they crushed they put into corials filled with water. These corials were then sunk in the stream. In a short time the poisoned fish floated to the surface of the water, and all the men took up their long-handled scoops and began to fish. The bassias of neku, whom the finder of the plant had appointed for the ceremony, directed the fishing. When a quantity of fish had been caught, those who were not of the village where the owner of the vine lived gave of their catch to the finder of the neku plant, and some went to the chief of the village, and the elders, too, had a share of what the outsiders had caught, though in some villages only the owner of the vine profited by the gifts of the others. Then the men joined the women, who were dressed in their finest cloths, and the dancing began.

1:Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
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304 the first cuts had been made on their faces long before they reached adolescence. When a girl began her monthly visits to the house which stood alone to one side of the road, directly opposite the shrine to the great gods, then it was time for the important cuts on the thighs, and it was the old women who made the cuts. But the reopening of old cuts, like the braiding of the hair, was a task the girls did for each other with enjoyment. It was with no small pride that they talked of their ornamental cuts.

The older girl held in her hand a razor from the white man's city. It was not very sharp, and the tropical dampness had spotted it with rust. Beside her was an old calabash holding charred rice hulls which had the moment before been rubbed into a powder, and a cloth whose color was rapidly being lost in the blood which flowed from the wounds which she cut.

Before proceeding with the cutting, the older girl would look critically at the girl on whom she was working, narrowing her eyes quite in the manner of an aesthete who was evaluating each detail. Then, with a firm grip on her razor, she would take an old scar between two fingers, and cut into it. Scar after scar she reopened, as the girls talked and laughed, until when she had made perhaps ten cuts, she would stop to staunch the blood and to survey her handiwork.

When the facial cuts were all open, it was time to rub the powder from the freshly charred rice hulls into the wounds.

"She will be handsome, ai-yo!" said the girl as she finished, and she dropped the smaller cloth back into another calabash which held water. With this moist cloth dipped into the black powder, she rubbed the black on the face of the seated girl. Now when the scar healed, each of the keloids would show black and prominent against the brown of the skin.

"Mine have been reopened four times," said the girl whose face had been treated, as she rose to make way for the next one. "The cuts heal fast."

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and it was they who in dream or vision, or in a state of possession, instructed living men in the ways of yet greater and greater obia. But there were those who held that obia ranked after the greatest of the deities, that obia surpassed the power of the ancestors, for obia knew how to make "*yorka tapu*"—preventives against troublesome ghosts, and obia men could summon the dead to enter the body of a living man to make revelations.

Whatever the position of obia in the supernatural world, its place on earth was to serve man, for of all living beings, man alone knew obia.

2 -

What were the manifestations of obia in the life of the Bush Negro as we found them?

A black pot with its magic powers was an obia pot, the charm worn about the neck was called an obia, the medicines we gave the natives for their eyes or their cuts were called white man's obia, and their own mixture of weeds steeped in water, which stood in the burning sun gathering a green scum until it should be ready for use, was also obia. Young Yamati who had danced *susa* for us did not have a cord about his neck, but, he had assured us, he had obia for long life as did his partner Sabape, though his own could not be seen, since it consisted of several obia cuts made shortly after birth, which served instead of the cord. The strings about the waists of children were obias. The slight cuts to be noticed on men's arms, on thighs, below the knee, below the shoulder blades were obia cuts, too.

Nor was that all.

Bayo had said to us, "When obia comes a man does bad things. He destroys. When mise comes, it is ugly sometimes."

It was obia, too—Apanto's obia—which had stopped our phonograph, and obia again, invoked this time by Bayo, which had strengthened the spirit of the machine.

We talked about obia to an elder, a village head, from one of the down-river settlements, which was not, however,

2: Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
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sufficient time for the nitrogenous substances to be reduced to fertilizing material. Because of this poverty of the ground and the constant foraging of insect and bird pests—the parrot is notorious among these—the cultivation of food is difficult and laborious for the Bush Negroes and the provision ground must often be moved to a fresh site.

Their main carbohydrate staple is the manioc or bitter cassava. It is a tuber-like plant that grows some three to seven feet in height, the edible portion being the underground root. The root contains the poisonous prussic acid, which must be carefully removed. Bush Negroes have been known to commit suicide by drinking the juice of the cassava. The plant itself resembles the tobacco plant, but has a stalk covered with bark and large roots that look like sweet potatoes.

The roots are harvested, carefully peeled, and reduced to a pulp by being rubbed on the roughened surface of an inclined board, the expelled free juices rolling down the incline into a bowl. The rest of the plant is thrown away. The pulp is stuffed into a cylindrical squeezing contrivance made of reed, known as the *matapee*. It resembles one of those toy finger grippers of straw that children play with. The reeds being flexible, elongating the tube by pulling at the ends reduces the diameter of it; this compresses the contents of the cylinder and squeezes out the deadly juice which then runs off into a bowl below. The matapee is a beautifully woven piece of basketry about five feet long and seven inches in diameter. The upper end is attached to the limb of a tree and a heavy stone is suspended from the lower end, the

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
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reeds, to catch the *dakgo fisee* or *maker fisee*—in other words, the dog fish and the eel. Trapped under water, these fish are easy prey to the savage piraya, so other devices are also used. A baited hook is attached to a bankside shrub called *masera masera* (*Mentrichardia sp.*), the stalk of which is bent over and fixed beneath the water, under a constant strain. The hold is very slight—a hair-trigger tension—so that as soon as the fish snatches the bait the slight movement frees the bent stalk, whipping the fish free of the water.

There is a plant used by the Negroes to poison fish. The juice of the *nekku* (*Lonchocarpus densiflorus* or *rufescens*) has an active alkaloid principle that is stupefying in its effect. It is called *yarro consali* by the Indians. Baskets full of nekku are carried to a small creek. The Djukas sit on the bank, beating the plant into pulp with carved wooden flails. Juice from the bruised shrub poisons the water, and the fish succumb, floating belly up, so that they can be scooped out with a dip-net. Often we passed Djuka tribesmen carrying baskets of this deadly plant toward some quiet stream.

In time of drought it often happens that fish are landlocked between sandbars. It is then an easy matter to scoop them out with a dip-net. Piraya are fished for with a hook and line, with a wire leader obtained in Paramaribo. A piece of bloody meat is used as bait, and the line is trolled. As soon as a fish is felt the rod is whipped overhead, throwing the fish up on the bank. Even out of water the piraya's jaws are still dangerous and avoided.

Gill nets are useless because there are too many predatory

2: Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
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drums carry farther toward heaven than the talkee-talkee of a lone supplicant.

It is not easy to distinguish between the primitive's magic and his medicine. In the village organization a distinction is sometimes made between the *medicine man*, who is concerned with remedies for sickness, and the *obeiah priest*, whose business is charms and rituals. There are two or three obeiah priests to each village. Their profession is the propitiation of spirits, that is, magic and religion. The magic of the obeiah men is largely secret. Once we arrived at a village while a ritual of some nature was going on. Pots were stewing in the centre of the clearing, while obeiah men were moving around them. One held a rattle, which he shook monotonously. The buhkra was asked to leave. It was magic in the making.

The Bush Negroes possess an extensive system of primitive medicine. Various roots, herbs, and nuts are gathered in the jungle, and their use is mingled with various superstitions. The witch doctor or medicine man who prepares infusions from these herbs holds no exalted position in the esteem of the villagers; he is simply following a particular profession to which no special prestige is attached. He may, however, be an obeiah priest in addition to being a medicine man.

He prepares several kinds of medicine, among them the *snakee-kutti*, or snake-bite cure. It cures the bites of all reptiles and makes the person immune from future attack. Snakee-kutti is made in this way: a venomous snake is killed and the head and the tail-end are cut from the body; the tail

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
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756 is placed in the mouth of the snake and the whole is roasted
787 over a slow fire, along with certain herbs. Incantations ac-
● 276 company the business. After the materials are thoroughly charred they are reduced to a homogeneous powder, which is administered in two ways: first, internally, and second, by making a small incision in the arm and rubbing some of the powder into the wound. At first we were inclined to think that some of the venom might remain in the poison glands of the reptile's head, and so act as an antigen to set up a real immunity. But the heat of the roasting fire would probably destroy any such toxin remaining, leaving the resultant powder non-antigenic.

Even in Paramaribo enthusiastic accounts of the marvellous powers of snakee-kutti are common. It is supposed by some to have the power of making snakes turn and flee. Being curious we tried it ourselves, but noticed no effects.

778 Some doctors are skilled in the preparation of a certain
787 strength-giving concoction especially in demand by Bush Negroes before a fight. If by the following day the combat has not taken place, the man who swallowed the medicine must get it out of his system by hacking viciously at a tree with his bush-knife; otherwise he will become ill.

According to Abuisa, men who drink this magic potion sometimes become so strong that with one blow of the machete they can make all the leaves of a tree fall off.

Bathing is another way of acquiring extraordinary strength. Three baths in water infused with *bimbe* leaves will give a man the power to pick a red-hot axe-head out of the midst

612 /8 cont./
[672] culprit is condemned to find the requital in his offspring. His
[567] children, children's children, and great-grandchildren must render slave services for the family of the person poisoned.

692 Moreover, they usually act in accordance with the judgment and the decision of their elders or council members. Most punish-
681 ments consist of whip lashes.

Chapter IV

Weapons

411 These consist of rifles, machetes, bow and arrow, and lances.
● 278 In some cases they also use a kind of cudgel (1). The most dangerous
682

1. An Indian weapon called apoetoe.

one that they possess, however, is an assortment of vegetable poisons with which they can secretly strike their enemies and whose effects manifest themselves slowly, but are usually lethal. They not only mix these with one food or another, or in snuff or tobacco, but in the case of some can merely bring them in contact with a part of the body and thereby produce to the most infectious results.

/9/

Chapter V

Dwellings, Practices, Customs, Housekeeping

342 Their huts are constructed low above the ground from un-
829 worked round wood, covered with pina, the leaves of a palm species (1), and surrounded by palisade poles.

1. Euterpe oleracea Mart.

352 The couches and sleeping places within are also made of paling.

358 Inside the hut is found the hearth or place for the fire, on
372 which they cook and in which they constantly maintain a fire for

/273 cont./

mother." Comrades, they suffered from pian (1)! All together

1. Skin disease from which most Refugee Black children used to suffer.

they entered the Obia house. Again: "Whips, why are you so handsome?"

(same formula)

Viop! viop! Anansi ran, he shut the door; he said: "Let me see, whips, strike so that I may see!" viop! viop!

(Somebody in the audience) "Wénon was inside?" -- "Wénon was inside!" (laughs). The whips hit them until their skin was bloody, their pian pimples cut, so that the blood flowed over them.

(cruel laughs from the audience)

Then Anansi opened the door and they fled.

The end.

4) Anansi and the Bat

Anansi was looking for someone to go with him to a festival which was taking place in a neighboring village... because the more who come, the more they give you to eat. He asked the bat, who said to him: "I haven't been to a festival for a long time. I'll go on the day you wish." The day they had set arrived. They started out; they walked until they had arrived near the village. Anansi said: "Comrade bat, see this lobi weko (2). If I begin to shout: "My belly,

2. Lobi weko: bougoumi (lagerstroemia alba) tree whose bark is used in the native pharmacopoeia.